BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Mary Osterloh Aiton

Mary Osterloh Aiton was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1910. The youngest of three children, she spent her childhood in Joplin where her father owned a bookstore. She attended Columbia Grade School and graduated from Joplin High. She then attended the University of Missouri for two years, followed by a move to Boston to study drama, literature, and radio at Emerson College, where she graduated in 1934.

She worked as a director for Universal Producing Company, a production company that would utilize local amateur talent in various communities. After two years she moved to Washington D.C. She went to night school at American University and began working as an informationist for the Civilian Conservation Corps.

In June 1941, she came to Hawai'i and worked as a typist and a secretary at Pearl Harbor in the port director's office. When the war started, she worked for the USO (United Service Organizations) as the assistant director of war workers. She brought shows—anything from hula to vaudeville—to the camps to entertain the civilian war workers. She met her husband, William Penn Aiton, who was the camp manager at Red Hill, and they were married in December 1943. During the last two years of the war she worked for the Office of War Information.

After the war, she worked for KGMB, the *Honolulu Advertiser,* and later for Earl Thacker Real Estate. She has two adopted daughters.

Tape No. 22-2-1-92

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Mary Osterloh Aiton (MA)

February 6, 1992

Mānoa, O'ahu

BY: Joe Rossi (JR)

JR: This is an interview with Mary Osterloh Aiton on February 6, 1992, in her Mānoa home. The interviewer is Joe Rossi.

Okay, Ms. Aiton, to begin with, could you tell me where you were born and when you were born?

MA: I was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1910, a long time ago.

JR: What kind of a town was Joplin?

MA: Oh, Joplin started as a mining camp and then it grew. It's in the southwest corner of the four states. And my father had a bookstore, and stationery and office supplies. He started out as a newsstand and then graduated to books, office supplies, and schoolbooks, as well as pencils and tablets and photographic equipment, and later mimeograph machines.

JR: What was his name?

MA: Theodore William Osterloh. O-S-T-E-R-L-O-H.

JR: And what was your mother's name?

MA: She was Amanda Osterloh.

JR: What was her maiden name?

MA: Nussbaum. N-U-S-S-B-A-U-M. And they both came from Cape Girardeau, Missouri. And then when he moved to Joplin and set up the bookstore, they were married and moved to Joplin. They had a fiftieth wedding anniversary in Hawai'i. They have both passed on now.

JR: Osterloh, what kind of name is that?

MA: It's German, it means "Easter fervor." Their grandparents (or maybe their parents) entered the United States through New Orleans and then came up the Mississippi River and settled in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. And then Joplin's in the other side of the state.

JR: And your father had the . . .

MA: The bookstore.

JR: . . . bookstore. What did Mom do?

MA: She just grew up in Cape Girardeau, and her parents had a department store in Cape. And so they were married in 1895.

JR: Eighteen ninety-five. That's almost a hundred years ago. (Chuckles)

MA: Yeah, mm hmm.

JR: How many children did they have?

MA: They had three—two older brothers and me.

JR: So you're the youngest.

MA: Yes.

JR: Do you remember what kinds of things you and your brothers would do as children in Joplin?

MA: Well, one brother was five years older than I was, so we didn't play too much together. My other brother was—oh, we'd put on shows in the neighborhood and go swimming. And they were Boy Scouts. My older brother went to a Pennsylvania university, the Wharton School of Finance. And then on his graduation---they went back for graduation and they were in an automobile accident and he was killed. My other brother was with the Du Pont Company. He never had another job. He went with the Du Pont Company immediately after he graduated from chemical engineering at [University of] Missouri. And he stayed there—it must have been fifty years, I guess. He was a development engineer. He stayed there long after he was supposed to retire.

JR: What kind of home did the family have when you were growing up?

MA: My father built the house, I think, before they were married, and we lived in the same house. It's still there. It's been bought by other people and modernized. But it was a two-story house with an attic and a basement and a barn, which later became a garage. (Chuckles)

JR: What schools did you attend?

MA: I went to [University of] Missouri for two years. And then I went to Emerson College in Boston for two-and-a-half years and graduated from there. (Then I attended American University, taking night courses in government writing, press releases, photo editing, etc.)

JR: What about as a youngster, you went to what elementary school?

MA: Oh, I went to Columbia Grade School and then Joplin High.

JR: Joplin High?

MA: Yeah.

JR: And you were the class of. . . .

MA: Oh, let's see. . . . I graduated from college in '34, so it was five years before that. I went back for a reunion a few months ago. But they have the reunions in ten-year spans, because there're not enough people left to have just your class alone. There were about five from my class.

JR: When you finished high school did you have any idea what field you wanted to go into when you got to college?

MA: Not exactly, except that this Emerson College was in drama and English literature and radio. And I thought that would be interesting to go there, so I did. A minister's wife had graduated from there and talked me into going there. So it was very interesting, living in Boston especially. I had a good friend who insisted that we take in everything, from the Boston Pops to all the shows. And we would go the very cheapest way, sometimes standing room only, but we didn't miss anything. We saw Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt and all the—whatever came to Boston.

JR: Had you done much travelling around prior to that?

MA: No. Just I went home Christmas and back to Boston on the train. And the last time I came home by the bus so I could make stops along the way and visit friends. But I didn't do any other travelling.

JR: You mentioned radio. Did radio have a special appeal for you?

MA: Yes, it was---of course, they didn't have TV then. And they had a radio station at this college. It was glamorous. (Chuckles)

JR: Did you have an interest in going into radio?

MA: Not particularly. I liked the drama field, but you didn't make a living those days in the drama field. When I graduated it was the big depression, and the banks were even closed for (some time). They continued to feed us at the dormitory, the school dormitory, but with the banks closed it was difficult to get money in any way. So the only job I was able to line up after graduation was at Sullins College, Virginia, a school for girls. I would teach drama and physical education, and they would pay my transportation round-trip from Joplin, Missouri—not go home Christmas—and a total of $100 for the total time. (Chuckles) I couldn't afford to accept their offer. It was the depression, and they figured just somebody to get experience. . . .

JR: How did your parents fare during the depression?

MA: Well, they economized. You'd pay $10 on a $100 bill at the department store and then paid cash for what you had to (buy). Pay a little on the back bill. And you made do.

JR: Were you on any kind of scholarship when you went to college or were they having to . . .

MA: No, I don't know that they had many scholarships then. I didn't have any though.

JR: So you didn't take the job.

MA: Not with [Sullins College]. There was an ad in the newspaper [for] Universal Producing Company, saying that they needed directors to put on amateur shows. They called themselves "the world's greatest professionals in amateur productions." And they had a training school in Fairfield, Iowa where you would go for three weeks, and then you would have a job and go out and put on shows in towns. They provided the scripts and the music and the costumes, a trunk of costumes. And they had a booker go ahead to each town and book a local organization to put on a show three weeks after that time and use local people—140 local people—in the show. And of course, they were all amateurs. Then we directors who had been to three weeks [of] training school in Fairfield, Iowa would arrive in the town, meet with the committee that was sponsoring—say, the Rotary Club—and get the committees organized and then start rehearsals, notifying the cast that they had been chosen for the parts.

The agreement was always that the money made would be given to some worthwhile community project so that they could get the cooperation of everyone in the community. So we had the combined church choirs singing Negro spirituals, and forty high school chorus girls to dance and sing and sell tickets, and then a businessman's stunt where the prominent businessmen would dress up like characters in 1890—men and women. And the chorus girls would sing appropriate songs, like "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" while the baseball player and his admirer would pantomime on the stage. So the businessmen didn't have to learn any lines. The chorus girls carried the music and the message, and it was a lot of fun.

JR: The businessmen just looked silly up there? (Chuckles)

MA: Yes, that was the whole idea, to get the most prominent attorneys, the mayor of the town, the principal of the high school, the president of the bank, and get them to dress up like Annie the Bathing Beauty of 1890, (the Floradora Girl, Gas House Harry). And they loved it!

Then we had a sketchy play to hold these various acts together, and those would always be the most prominent—socially prominent—people in town. So with so many different categories of people being in the show you were sure of having the rest in the audience. And I preferred the small towns like 5,[000] to 10,000 people, because then everybody knew everybody and it was a lot of fun.

JR: Had you performed in much theater?

MA: No. Actually, I never did. (Chuckles) I was the directress.

JR: In college, did you . . .

MA: Oh, we had a few shows. Nothing. . . . I was never the actress.

JR: You didn't major in drama did you?

MA: I think most of the courses there were drama. You took public speaking, and you took voice, and you took singing, and you took interpretation of literature. But it was sort of just regular AB [Bachelor of Arts] courses.

JR: How long did you do that?

MA: I did that for two years. Some of the towns I went back the next year and put on a different show. The first show, which was really the most popular, was "Uncle Henry's Wedding," and the second one was "Crazy Politics." They both had pretty much the same format—to draw from all the different elements in a town.

The Universal Producing Company would split fifty-fifty with the profits and the expenses. The expenses were always covered by the advertising program. They would print up all the characters' names and then sell ad spaces. The advertising committee would sell ad spaces on the program, which was also printed on various colored paper and used as flyers around town, with maybe the pink ones going home with the weekly newspaper and the blue ones going—the chorus girls putting them in parked cars, and the purple ones going home with the school children. But anyway, all the expenses on the printing and the rental of the hall for two nights and a matinee and a dress rehearsal were always covered by the advertising program. So all the ticket sales were profit. And I got sixty-five dollars for each show. That was my salary, (chuckles) and then a percentage of the company's profits. The company and the sponsoring organization split the profits then. And I got my sixty-five and a percentage out of the company's profits. So they were able to do things in a town, like build a swimming pool in the park—a wading pool in the park, not a swimming pool—or buy sweaters for the high school football team or pay for their travel, something like that. The money always had to be given for some community enterprise.

JR: Sounds like you were on the move, though, for two years.

MA: Yes. I got a little tired of that, and I decided I'd like to stay put for a while where I'd have some permanent friends. So a friend of mine said, "Why don't you come to Washington?" And she said I could be her roommate, and she knew where I could get a job as a typist. Fourteen-forty a year, I remember, (chuckles) and that sounded great.

JR: That's what, $1,400?

MA: One thousand four hundred and forty dollars a year. Well, to give you an idea, while I was with Universal Producing Company I would stay in a private home for the three weeks I was in that town, because they usually didn't even have hotels and anyway we couldn't afford them. But the sponsoring organization would provide a home, and the rent was usually $2.50 or $3.00 a week, and they usually included breakfast. So that's how you could manage to live on sixty-five dollars, plus your commission.

JR: So, after the two years with Universal what did you do?

MA: Then I went to Washington D.C. and got a job, first with the Department of Justice in the lands division, and then I went to night school and took informationist—in other words, publicity—courses at American University and got a job with the Civilian Conservation Corps [CCC] as an informationist. So I wrote press releases and some articles. The idea was to humanize the statistics. For instance, instead of just saying that 44,000 of the people in the CCC camps went to school at night and earned their high school diploma, or they learned how to take care of a truck and change tires and how to weld—and, of course, contour farming and planting trees that the CCC did so much of. So my job was to humanize that. We had lots of photographs, so I'd collect the photographs and write cover stories on what the CCC was doing in the camps and explain it to the public. That's what I did for about two years.

Then they were closing the CCC camps. Apparently they perceived the war was coming on, World War II. So I knew the camps would be closing. And I wasn't married, I thought I'd like to have a paid vacation someplace. So I went to the navy department and asked if they needed secretaries at Pearl Harbor [Naval Shipyard], and they did. So I went and I got a job to start the day I arrived. And they said that they wouldn't give me a contract, I could come back [to the Mainland] any time I wanted to. And as a matter of accommodation, I could go over on the SS *Wharton* for a dollar a day, which was a navy transport. So that's what I did.

JR: What did you know about Hawai'i at that time?

MA: Oh, just that it was a glamorous place to visit. I thought I would like to have a paid vacation and go swimming in the ocean. Being from Missouri I had always longed to swim in the ocean and so this was an opportunity. The navy wasn't sending unmarried girls to Hawai'i at that time because of the Massie affair some years before, but they needed secretaries and typists at Pearl Harbor. It's under civil service. So I was test case number one, and after that lots of girls came over.

JR: Had you heard of the Massie case prior to that?

MA: Yes, but not too much.

JR: They were afraid for your safety obviously.

MA: Well, there was---I don't know all the particulars of it, but it was something about a navy officer's wife having an affair with a local.

JR: Something like that. [In 1931, Thalia Massie, wife of a navy lieutenant, claimed she was raped by a group of local men. The incident and its aftermath created much controversy in Hawai'i and divided the community between those who believed Mrs. Massie's claims and those who felt the local men were the victims of race prejudice.]

MA: And it looked bad, I guess. They just didn't want complications.

JR: But you didn't have any reservations about coming?

MA: No. So I came over and went to work at Pearl Harbor for. . . . Oh, I came in June of '41.

Then when the war started, why, I had been a typist, a secretary, at Pearl Harbor in the port director's office. And when the war started, then I applied for USO [United Service Organizations] work.

JR: The ride over here on the—you said it was a navy transport?

MA: Yes.

JR: What was that like?

MA: Oh, it was a lot of fun for an unmarried girl! (Chuckles) I made friends with a woman who was a lieutenant commander's wife and so she invited me to share her room coming over. So we had good accommodations since she was the highest ranking on that ship. This was before the war started, and it was dependents going to Hawai'i. It took ten days. The ship went to San Diego before it came to Honolulu, so the navy, as a matter of accommodations, said I could go free except I'd have to pay a dollar a day for my meals. So it cost me ten dollars to get to Hawai'i from the West Coast.

JR: Not a bad deal.

MA: No, no.

(Laughter)

JR: So you were working at Pearl Harbor as a secretary when you arrived.

MA: Mm hmm [yes].

JR: What was the mood like then at Pearl Harbor?

MA: Well, nothing---I can't. . . .

JR: There was no sense that we're gearing up [for war]?

MA: No, no. But when December 7 happened I was living in an apartment in Waikīkī with another girl. And, of course, on Sunday morning I wasn't working. So I phoned my boss later on in the afternoon when I could get through and asked if there was anything I could do. He said, "Well, don't come out now, but come out at daylight and bring some tomato juice and coffee and whatever you happen to have in your refrigerator," because there's nothing to eat out there. And they'd been there since morning, of course.

JR: So to get you just maybe to back up a little, exactly what happened that morning as far as you can remember? What you were doing and . . .

MA: Well, I was supposed to go swimming with a navy officer at ten o'clock in the morning. And when this happened, I phoned him and said, "What's going on? Is this just army maneuvers? Are you coming to swim?"

And he said he didn't know anything about it. So he said, "I'll phone and find out what it's about."

He didn't phone back until two o'clock in the afternoon. Then he gave me a list of names of wives to call to tell them that their husbands wouldn't be home for several days. So it was on—I listened to the radio, of course. It said don't go out. My roommate, who was a teacher at Punahou School, had an invitation to go into Mānoa Valley to have breakfast. And she was in the shower while most of this was first coming on. She didn't believe it.

JR: Did you hear the explosions and that kind of thing?

MA: Yes, and then it was on the radio that this is the real thing. And, "Doctors report here." And, "Don't go out on the street, and don't make phone calls."

And so I told her about it, and she said, "Oh, it's just the army maneuvers." So she got in her car and drove to her breakfast in Mānoa Valley.

And they heard bombings at the breakfast. But there were some guests from China, and they said, "You know, if we weren't in Hawai'i we'd think a war was going on."

(Laughter)

MA: Anyway, they didn't have their radio on. And they went through breakfast, and she drove back to Waikīkī about eleven o'clock in the morning and still didn't know that it was the real thing.

JR: Oh, really?

MA: By then, though, she. . . .

JR: What was the mood? Were you frightened that there'd be an invasion or . . .

MA: Yes, we were. They put barbed wire on the beaches, and we couldn't go swimming, of course. And for two or three days, they said—well, when they phoned from Pearl Harbor they said that our fleet is at the bottom of Pearl Harbor, which it was. They raised quite a few of them very fast. But we didn't have any planes either, to speak of. So three days later planes arrived from the Mainland and everybody stood and cheered them. They didn't hear us, of course, but we were glad to see them. So then, of course, the real crisis was [the Battle of] Midway. And the planes went out then and we knew they were going. And if they didn't stop them [i.e., the Japanese military] there, why, we would be next. That was really the frightening part.

JR: So when did you finally get down to your office at Pearl Harbor? Was that the following day?

MA: Oh, the next morning. I had to wait for a ride. I didn't have transportation. I was in a car pool and I had to wait for somebody to get me there. And when I got out there, why, the confidential files (office) was right next door, and it was in shambles, right next door to the port director's office. But anyway, we worked. We would get calls, "Wake Island is out of

water. What can you send?" And the port director would talk with the admiral and try to figure out what ships we had that could go there, that could get in the harbor, and that hadn't been carrying gasoline that could carry water. So that was what they were concerned with.

JR: Where was your office in relation to . . .

MA: It was in the administration building. And the admiral's office, the port—well, that was the port director's office, Commander Dirks. But anyway, it was the administrative building, just one building.

JR: What was the scene like? I mean, you must have seen the destruction . . .

MA: Well, the Pearl Harbor hospital was not far away. And somebody sent word around, "Could the girls who are working go over there and just light the cigarettes and talk to some of the sailors who were"—they couldn't take care of them, so they had them laid out on the grass outside the hospital.

So, of course, we all said, "Yes, of course, but could we get transportation?" And the transportation never arrived, things were so chaotic.

JR: I guess not having been here at the time that's the image I have, say, of that Monday morning, just complete chaos down there.

MA: Yeah.

(Pause)

JR: Things calmed down though, after . . .

MA: Well, for a while the army and the navy seemed to be shooting at each other at night. Because they couldn't get there—from Hickam Field to Pearl Harbor, each side would think the others were the enemy. And one night we couldn't get through to go home to Waikīkī, and so we had to make do. I finally got home late that night.

JR: So you were still living with the teacher, the Punahou teacher?

MA: Yes. Well, shortly after Pearl Harbor it was—we couldn't black out the apartment there. It was so open, the gas stove would send a beam out. And there was no way to black out, and we had to have blackout conditions. Also, there was no way to shop for groceries if you were working all day long. And so I moved back to the Brookland Hotel, where I had lived when I first arrived. I lived there.

JR: Did you work longer hours once the war started? Were you working long days, do you remember?

MA: I don't remember exactly. We had set times for transportation to deliver you and pick you up. I really don't remember whether we worked long hours or not. It was shortly after Pearl Harbor that I went with USO, which was more my field. And when they started, I had a job

as assistant director of war workers' USO. So that job was for the civilians.

JR: How did you get that job? Was there an advertisement or . . .

MA: I really don't know. I guess by word of mouth. I've forgotten how I got started on it, but our headquarters was at the [Army-Navy] YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] Downtown. And my boss, Mel Harter, was assistant minister at Central Union Church until he took over the job as head of the (civilian) war workers' USO. I was assistant director. And we each would take a bus load of entertainers each night. He would take a bus load and I would take a bus load, and we would take them to the camps to provide entertainment.

JR: Now, these are civilians that were hired by the military to do work?

MA: You mean the war workers? There were sixteen (civilian) war worker camps. Of course, Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field were two of them. Then there was Waikakalau and Wheeler Field and Bellows and all the others around on the island. And Red Hill had 4,000 hard-rock miners for the underground fuel storage. And these men were under blackout conditions and gasoline rationing. They were just stuck in the camps, and so (USO) tried to provide entertainment for them. USO's job was to take a show once a week to each camp, or a dance, or (bring some) into town for a dance—try to find some entertainment for them. They also had other entertainment, of course. They had movies, and they had gambling, and they had—that was about all, I guess. (Chuckles)

JR: So these are men, all men?

MA: They were all men. I don't think they had women at Pearl Harbor or at Hickam in the shops where they were repairing planes and ships.

JR: And they were mostly from the Mainland?

MA: Yes, under civil service. They got good pay for overseas work, being in Hawai'i. And most of them were under—in fact, I guess they were all under contract to stay for a certain length of time. But they would get word from the Mainland that their wives or their daughters were playing around, and being confined so closely it wasn't easy on them. Like at Red Hill, it was hard-rock mining. They were digging. They had good food—the government had high priorities on these war workers.

JR: So you had a lot of contact with them, bringing these shows and whatnot?

MA: Well, I would go once a week to each camp, and my boss would go once a week to each camp. So with the sixteen [camps], we'd (take approximately) a show a week to each (camp). So we would take whatever entertainment we could dig up. It was paid for by the recreation department of the civilian (camps). Of course, the military got Bob Hope and all the good entertainment, but the civilian (war workers) didn't qualify for that. I think in the contracts for these Mainland actors, their union contracts wouldn't allow them to (perform) for civilians. So we had to dig up whatever we could. We'd take a hula show about once a month to a camp. And then we'd get the community players, if they had something that was really interesting.

JR: Like a theater-type thing?

MA: Yeah, mm hmm. And then we'd get high school chorus girls to learn a dance routine, and maybe an army band or a navy band, they always liked to go. And sometimes we'd make up our own shows and use some of the people at the camp, where they didn't have to learn a lot of lines.

JR: The workers?

MA: Yeah, the workers. Like we had one show called "The Garter and Bustle Show." We took costumes out for the men and they would dress up like characters in 1890 and cavort around. And we had the cancan girls from the high school with costumes. And we'd get an army band to go with it. And any entertainers in the camp, if they could play the ukulele [*'ukulele*] or guitar or anything, we'd use them. We even took a dog act once. We couldn't find anything else.

(Laughter)

MA: Sometimes we'd get some of the girls from River Street to clean up their [burlesque] acts a bit and take them out. But we'd put on these shows, take them out. Sometimes we'd have a dance in town—say, at Central Union Church—what they called a candlelight dinner. But you could only take care of maybe 300 men with that. But they would come in and have dinner and dancing, a nice time. And we would get girls, maybe nurses from Queen's Hospital and sometimes girls from—oh, there was a Japanese church where the girls were very cooperative and the church was cooperative. And we'd take them out. We'd get proper clearance. We'd always have to get clearance from the certain departments. But the bus would appear at five o'clock every afternoon, coming first to the [Army-Navy] YMCA Downtown. And then I would have the list of where we would go, where we would pick up these various entertainers, because they didn't have transportation. So we'd usually have about thirty people in the bus, go out to each camp and have dinner there, and then they'd put on the show. After dinner they usually gave us ice cream and coffee. And so that's what we did.

JR: I'm just going to stop for a second and turn the tape around.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

JR: It sounds like you had a long workday.

MA: Well, it was. We'd start in the morning, lining up the show. We would mail out what shows were available to each camp, because they paid for them. They would indicate which shows they would like and when. And we scheduled them, and then [had to] get clearance for the various performers and arrange the bus transportation. So we'd schedule them, of course, in advance, but we'd organize it during the daytime and then leave at five o'clock to go out to the camps. Sometimes it was quite late, the time we'd get home, after having dinner and

putting on the show and then coming back. One time we came back over the Pali and there was a—a small plane had crashed on the one narrow road that was there. On the old Pali Highway [i.e., Old Pali Road] there was no room to navigate. The bus had to back down the Pali Highway and wait until they could clear the wreckage away from the small plane that had crashed right on the highway.

JR: That must have still been blackout conditions.

MA: Oh yes. The bus had dark blue over most of the headlights and then one small circle toward the bottom of the light that would look right down on the road, and I think that was light blue. We would go very slowly. (Chuckles) But there wasn't much other traffic to worry about.

JR: What were the spirits like of the workers in these camps?

MA: Oh, they were glad to see any kind of entertainment come out. They liked to see the girls come out especially.

JR: Were they well behaved? You didn't have to worry about the girls?

MA: Well, they were well behaved. Sometimes they would be raucous. (Laughs) After all . . .

JR: Boys will be boys.

MA: Yeah.

JR: What were the more popular—you mentioned the dog act?

(Laughter)

MA: That was a last resort.

JR: What were the more popular things, the plays or the dancing girls or . . .

MA: Well, they liked "The Garter and Bustle Show," which was where they dressed up themselves, where they had audience participation. And then we put on the drunkard ones, the melodramas, so that the audience could boo and hiss. And the actors didn't have to have much rehearsing, they just ad-libbed. And they enjoyed the dancing when we could get enough people. But you couldn't entertain the whole camp with a dance.

JR: How about the Hawaiian entertainment? You mentioned hula.

MA: Oh, they always liked that, but they were worked to death, too. They were serving the military also. But we'd take out, usually, a Hawaiian entertainment about once a (month to each camp). And they always enjoyed that.

JR: You mentioned that you would also have dances. In addition to these things at the camps, you'd have dances in town.

MA: In town at Central Union Church. That's one. What was the other place? Mostly Central Union Church. They had the largest facility. We'd have a candlelight dinner, and the volunteers at the church would put on the dinner. And then we'd have an army or navy band to play. We would get any unmarried girls around town that we could find to come and dance. And they were usually glad to get out, an excuse to be out at night, because blackout conditions and transportation—gasoline just not available, unless it was essential work. So we had a list of girls that we would usually call and they would come.

JR: Now, you mentioned that you were living at the—what was the name of the . . .

MA: Brookland Hotel.

JR: The Brookland Hotel. Where was that and what kind of a place was that?

MA: It was on Victoria Street, sort of next to the [Honolulu] Academy of Arts.

JR: The academy was built at that time?

MA: Uh huh [yes], I remember it was. Then when I got married, why, we built our house in Mānoa. My husband was building it himself in his off-time. That was after the camps had closed. Toward the end of the war, the war worker camps were closing down, and so we didn't have as. . . . He was camp manager at Red Hill, where I had taken shows, and that's where I met him. So when his job was finished at Red Hill—and one other short job out at Waipahu, I believe it was, as camp manager, just to close down the Waipahu camp—then he went with Rattan Art Gallery after his war work was done. He built the house with the help of two Seabees on Sundays. And we had a victory garden, and raised some chickens so that we'd have eggs. (Chuckles) And as soon as any of the baby chicks grew up, as soon as one of them crowed, why, he would go in the pot. We'd have chicken then, cooked chicken, but otherwise we had the eggs from the chickens.

JR: That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about, the inconveniences felt during the war, in terms of not being able to get certain kinds of food or . . .

MA: Well, we didn't get oranges during the war, except when we went to a high-priority camp or something where they would give us oranges for dessert or for after. We would have oranges there with our meal perhaps. But I remember missing oranges most. I don't know why, because they used to raise oranges here in Hawai'i. But they weren't at that time, I guess. It mostly came from California. And let's see, we had no Mainland liquor. I think Island liquor was rationed. Or maybe Mainland was too, one bottle a week or something like that. We could get along all right. But when we had our wedding reception, we had some friends in the military who donated their bottles so we could have a proper toast at the wedding.

JR: What was the date on your wedding?

MA: It was December 4 in 1943.

JR: And your husband's name was . . .

MA: William. William Penn Aiton. He comes by it honestly—he was a Penn. He worked for a firm in the Philippines for seven years, a rattan factory, and then when he came to Honolulu he bought the Rattan Art Gallery and had it for some fifty years. He sold it about fifteen years ago. And they would import components of rattan furniture. And they would come in a container shipment. Like a chair would be in five pieces maybe, so that it would be assembled here. And he designed furniture all during that time. When he started designing furniture it was used mostly for lanais [*lānais*] or porches, and then he started designing furniture for living rooms and dining rooms and hotel lobbies and condominiums. And so the business grew.

JR: Yeah, I think most people have heard of Rattan Art Gallery.

(Laughter)

MA: I think so. He modernized the factory in the Philippines while he was there. It was the largest factory. It had 500 employees. When he was there visiting his brother, who lived in the Philippines, he went into one of these factories and saw the workers—old men sitting on the ground, on the floor, with all the parts of the furniture spread around him. And they would assemble one chair. One man would do it. It would take him maybe a couple of days or so. So Bill decided to see if the manager would hire him to modernize the factory. So he eventually became a partner and managed this factory in the Philippines. He would hire young men so that it would continue. And [he] put up tables. And they would have one man work on one piece of furniture—bend it and shape it and put on the wrappings maybe, or somebody else put on the wrappings. But they did it in pieces. And they, some of the time, jumped on the table and worked there, which was the way they were used to working. And that way they could ship the furniture (in components). Instead of shipping a whole chair assembled, they could ship it in parts and then have it (fashioned into a chair at the factory in Honolulu). (Then) at the retail outlet here, they would sell it. The customer could select their colors—whether they wanted walnut or antique white or other colors—and select their upholstery fabrics (and table tops). That was done here, in Hawai'i.

JR: You met him at the Red Hill . . .

MA: Yes, he was camp manager there. That was underground fuel storage (facility).

JR: Do you remember how he got into that?

MA: He was working for Rattan Art Gallery, and someone heard that he had had some experience in food management. So they contacted him to come to Red Hill. And then when he got there, why, they put him—I think he was food management for a short time and then they made him camp manager.

JR: Do you know what his duties were as camp manager?

MA: Well, he was in charge of entertainment and food, and he just managed the camp. They had 4,000 hard-rock miners there, and they had to house them and feed them. I've forgotten how many sittings a day they had in the dining room. They would just set up and give them breakfast and then fix their lunch, brown bag it, for their job. And then another group would

come, and then another and another and another. And then as soon as they got through with all of those they'd start dinner. (Laughs) So that they could accommodate all of them in the (same) dining room and get them all fed. And these workers, some of them were hard-rock miners, some were pouring cement, and some were in boats going around testing for leaks. And there were accidents occasionally, drownings. There'd be a leak and it would pull the boat down to the bottom of the. . . .

JR: And the men with it.

MA: Yeah. But anyway, they got the job done.

JR: And that was---you mentioned there was an underground fuel . . .

MA: It's underground fuel storage. I don't know whether it's still used or not.

JR: And the camp, then, was above ground, next to the . . .

MA: It's Red Hill. It was at Red Hill. They had housing there for them on the project. They had all these men and no transportation.

JR: They were stuck there.

MA: They were stuck. Same way with the other camps.

JR: Other than the venue where you staged your particular show, did you go around any of the camps . . .

MA: No, (not much).

JR: . . . see what the living quarters were like or anything?

MA: No, no I didn't. We would arrive probably about 5:30 to 6:00 [P.M.], immediately have dinner, then put on the show, and then leave afterwards. So we didn't see the surroundings. Which is just as well, everything was supposed to be super secret.

JR: Oh.

(Laughter)

JR: If you don't mind, I'm going to ask a few questions about your marriage, the wedding, because I think it's interesting to find out what they were like during the war. Where was the wedding held and the reception?

MA: The reception was at Jean Wigg's house in Kahala. And her husband and son were still on the Mainland. They were evacuated as civilians and non-essential. And then she got a job with USO, so she was essential. So she came back, but her husband and son were still stranded in California, since they were not in essential work—he was a lawyer. So she said she would give the reception for me at her house. So we had the reception. I spent my money on the

food for the reception (chuckles) and my husband spent his savings on our honeymoon to the Big Island. But we had a charge account at Chun Hoon [Market], and we both had jobs. So that's where our marriage started. We were married at St. Clement's Episcopal Church. The 85th [Division] Band wanted to play the wedding song for us, "The Hawaiian Wedding Song," because they had been accompanying us on quite a few of the USO shows. They did play, but the minister wouldn't let them inside the church to play. They had to have the traditional church music, not "The Hawaiian Wedding Song." So they had to play it outside.

JR: And then you went to . . .

MA: Then we went to the Volcano House on our honeymoon, and the plane was blacked out. You couldn't look out the windows, it was all black.

JR: They didn't want you to look out the windows?

MA: I don't know whether they didn't want us to look out or they didn't want any light to show. The war was still on. But we didn't see any of the views. (Chuckles)

Then we came back here and built the house. And my husband after the war was with Rattan Art Gallery, and I went with Earl Thacker Real Estate. Then when we adopted two children, two babies, so I didn't work while they were growing up. Then I was with Hugh Menefee [Incorporated] for about twenty years, and then back with Earl Thacker [Limited] now, real estate business, (where I still am working). (You never have to retire in the real estate business. We are independent contractors, so can work as much or as little as we wish.)

My husband was with Rattan Art Gallery for some fifty years. And then he sold it and was on consultation, non-competition, for a while. Then he volunteered with Goodwill Industries and set up a refinishing shop and re-upholstery shop, especially for rattan furniture because they get a lot of rattan donated to them. So he set up the spray booth and was training foremen, and he did that for about two years until his illness kept him at home. But there they had a twofold purpose, of course. One was to improve the furniture so that instead of selling a table, say, for fifteen dollars, they could sell it for seventy-five dollars at one of the outlets here. And the same table would cost several hundred [dollars], if it were new, at a retail store. He made money for them, quite a bit, during the two years' time. But that was rather hard on him because he was a perfectionist. He wanted the furniture to be just absolutely right. And with the retarded workers that they utilized, sometimes they would sand a long, long, long time if you didn't watch them every minute. And then just as soon as the foremen, who were not retarded—and he would train a foreman—just as soon as they got really good they would get a job out in the private sector. Which was fine for them, but then they had to start again to train another foreman. But he trained several that became very good and got jobs. He did that for two years. He got two awards, one as a volunteer in Hawai'i and one as a volunteer candidate on the Mainland, with Goodwill Industries.

JR: And you folks moved up here . . .

MA: It was during the war.

JR: During the war. You mentioned you had a victory garden?

MA: We had a victory garden. He had the Seabees working on Sundays up here and would pay them, when we were still building, you know. I would carry water to the lot next door where we had the victory garden. So they rigged up a sprinkling system one day, and let me carry the water over there to water the victory garden and then they turned on the sprinkler system, which . . .

(Laughter)

MA: . . . not only got me wet but . . .

(Laughter)

JR: Do you remember what you were growing?

MA: Lettuce and tomatoes, as I remember. We had mānoa lettuce and tomatoes. I think we tried some other things without success. And we did have some bees for a while.

JR: Bees?

MA: Bees.

JR: Oh, beehives.

MA: Beehives. Some friend of Bill's was a Boy Scout leader and they had a project, the Boy Scouts did, and then it disbanded. So he gave Bill the beehives and we put them up back of our house, on the side of Tantalus. So we had honey for a while.

JR: Now, you didn't stay with USO through the war, though, right? You went and . . .

MA: No. When they closed the camps—most of them were closing down, the civilians' part. (Then) I went with Office of War Information [OWI] for the last two years of the war. And I wrote radio script. One of them was "Democracy in Action." It was a fifteen-minute program, just close-up views of democracy. We did everything from League of Women Voters and Red Cross and Abraham Lincoln to. . . . They were just to show what democracy was like. And then the other program was "What America is Reading," a fifteen-minute program. And that was easy because I'd take excerpts of *Readers Digest* articles. And my boss was Brad Smith, and they would have staff meetings and decide what subjects would be suitable for broadcasting. These were translated into Japanese and beamed to Japan and the Philippines.

JR: So this was propaganda material.

MA: Yeah, trying to sell democracy.

(Laughter)

MA: We don't know if they were jammed or ever got there or not, but they were translated by our translators in the Office of War Information.

JR: Where was that office?

MA: It was down in Kaka'ako section. I don't think the building is there anymore.

JR: Was it a very . . .

MA: I think it was a one-story building. It seems like it fronted Kapi'olani Boulevard and then spread back. And the translators were in one wing and the newscasters were in another wing. And then they had a broadcasting place out—I believe it was Kāne'ohe, where it was beamed.

JR: So this was their base, then, for information . . .

MA: For the Pacific area. A lot of the information came from Washington D.C. that we broadcast, but there was a newscaster who would write up the daily news for translation, and then I had the feature part.

JR: Was the office involved in anything other than these broadcasts?

MA: No. The broadcasting and the—oh, I believe they did do pamphlets in one section that were dropped by the planes.

JR: Over. . . .

MA: Wherever they did.

JR: How did you like doing that job?

MA: I liked that, I enjoyed it. A lot of nice people working there. And that's where I was when they declared the war was over. Everybody left. I went to Rattan Art Gallery, where my husband was at that time. The store at that time was where the fountain is now for the waterworks [i.e., Board of Water Supply]. It was a very small operation, just my husband and two employees.

JR: That's what, down Beretania [Street]?

MA: It was down on Beretania where the waterworks is now, where the fountain is now, actually. And the retail part was there, and around the corner in a place about the same size was the so-called factory.

JR: That must have been a happy day.

MA: Yes indeed. (Chuckles) Everybody was running around embracing everybody and. . . .

JR: So did OWI then shut its doors at that point?

MA: Yes. I went with KGMB radio then, selling radio time. And it was very much in demand. We would stand in line practically to get available spots to sell, because they were just beginning to get merchandise in since the war was over. So the merchants were anxious to advertise,

and radio was the way to do it, plus newspaper. I was with KGMB for about a year or two, and then they decided the salespeople were making too much commission. They were making more than the managers. They cut the commission, so we all quit. (Laughs) Then I went with the [*Honolulu*] *Advertiser* and had a column called "Shopping Around with Mary" for a couple of years. And that was selling newspaper space to merchants. And then I'd write up what they wanted advertised that week. So it was a weekly column.

JR: And then somewhere along the line you got your hand in real estate also.

MA: Um hm, yeah. I had the column for about two years and then I got into real estate. And then we adopted our two daughters, and I stayed home then for a while.

JR: There's just a few other things I wanted to ask you that I thought of after you mentioned. . . . One was the Punahou teacher that you were living with. When the war broke out, Punahou was taken over by the . . .

MA: That's right.

JR: . . . Army Corps of Engineers [i.e., U.S. Engineer Department].

MA: Yes, they said they were headed for the university, I understand, and they got mixed up and took over Punahou and then they just stayed. She was without a job, so she. . . . I don't know what—she went with Hanahau'oli [School], and she became their principal for several years. Lenore Nims, she's married now. I've forgotten her married name. But she was head of Hanahau'oli for quite a few years.

JR: The other thing, if you'll excuse me asking, was—two single women in Hawai'i during the war, it sounds like the ratio of men to women was . . .

MA: I think there were 200 men to every woman, someone said. There were lots of dances, lots of fun. And you had time off.

JR: When you were working for the USO or OWI, did you have any sense that you were helping the war effort? I hear people use that phrase.

MA: Well, we assumed we were. We assumed we were helping the war effort. (Chuckles) It's hard to tell whether you contributed anything or not. But we worked at it. Morale was pretty high.

JR: Looking back today as we're sitting here, it seemed like it was such a disruptive force on Hawai'i, you know. I'm wondering if you have any . . .

MA: You mean during the war?

JR: Yeah, the whole war experience.

MA: Well, of course, with blackout conditions and gasoline restrictions there wasn't any nightlife to speak of unless it was through the military or people in essential. . . . The people that were going around at night had to have passes, and they had to be on some kind of legitimate

(business).

JR: One other thing, now that I think of it. When I talked to you before this interview, you mentioned something about the stairwell down below? Your neighbors used to . . .

MA: (Chuckles) Yes. My husband and I looked for six months for a lot to build our house on. And we never could find the exact one that suited him. So finally, someone—a realtor—said, "Well, this property has been overgrown for twenty years. I don't know whether it's even still for sale, but I'll show it to you." So he brought us up here.

And there was a nine-foot-high lava rock retaining wall and a two-car garage and a stairwell. The stairwell was being used by the neighbors as a bomb shelter. So we were able to climb up on the wall, and he could see Diamond Head and the ocean, so he said, "This is it." Tantalus was behind us and pouring down behind the wall. So we got Walker-Moody Construction Company, who wanted dirt for the base of roads out Pearl Harbor way. They brought up two trucks and a cat [Caterpillar] machine or whatever it is, and loaded for about a year. And they would haul this dirt away. And we got level ground, and they got dirt for Pearl Harbor for their projects. It was a win-win situation—we got level ground and they got dirt. And then we got level ground so that we could put a house on it.

JR: You mentioned something else [in a previous conversation] about selling the first condo in Hawai'i.

MA: (Laughs) I was working for Earl Thacker, and I was a new, young employee. A client came in and he wanted to buy just a grass shack on Waikīkī Beach, but right on the ocean. And I think he had $15,000. It might have been less. So being the youngest, I got this very unlikely client. There just weren't things like that available. So anyway, the first condominium was being built, so I showed him the apartment. I think it was Diamond Head Ambassador. I'm not sure. Anyway, I sold him the ground-floor apartment on it, which was right by the ocean. So he bought that.

JR: History was made.

MA: Yes, started something.

JR: For better or worse.

MA: Yeah. (Chuckles)

JR: It seems like we've covered almost everything. We just plowed right through. I don't have any more questions. I don't know if you have anything to add?

MA: I don't think I have anything to add. My two daughters are grown. They're married and living here in Hawai'i, for which I am very thankful. They have their families.

JR: What are their names?

MA: Nancy Miller and Jane Soo. So they live here in Hawai'i and that's fine.

JR: Well, thank you very much.

MA: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

AN ERA OF CHANGE

Oral Histories of Civilians in World War II Hawai'i

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